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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 002663

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [KPAO](#) [OEXC](#) [SCUL](#) [PHUM](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: NEW DRAFT LAW REMOVES BARRIER TO UNIVERSITY  
ENTRANCE FOR GRADUATES OF IMAM HATIP SCHOOLS

REF: ANKARA 2600

(U) Classified by DCM Robert Deutsch. Reasons: 1.5 (b) and  
(d)

1. (C) Summary: AK Party (AKP) government will press ahead with its new draft higher education law despite open opposition from the military and higher education establishment. Under the existing law, higher education has been under the purview of the controversial Higher Education Council (YOK), set up by the military after the 1980 coup. YOK has been autonomous from the government, i.e., the Ministry of Education. Rather than overhauling the troubled educational system, the draft law would transfer important decisions formerly reserved for YOK to the government, further reducing university autonomy. The most controversial provision would equalize the university entrance exam coefficient for graduates of the religious-oriented imam hatip high schools who want to study in departments other than theology, a change demanded by AKP's voter base. This move is viewed by AKP as righting the discriminatory ranking of entrance exam results but by the "secular" establishment as an effort to turn the university system into a fifth column for "fundamentalists". End Summary.

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Highlights of New Draft Law  
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2. (U) The new law would transfer the authority from YOK to universities to hire low-level staff and to the Inter University Council (university rectors and one professor from each university) for higher-level staff. If the draft law passes, all 22 YOK members will be dismissed and replaced by 15 members selected by the President, government ministers, and the Inter University Council of Rectors. A constitutional amendment adopted by Parliament May 7 removed the Turkish General Staff (TGS) representative from YOK. Instead of being selected by the President, the chairman of YOK will be elected by the 15 YOK members, ostensibly bringing more democracy to the process. The law will also establish ethics commissions in universities to punish professors who plagiarize. It will bring more objective criteria to hiring staff, shorten the waiting period between assistant and associate professorships, and legalize student organizations. The most controversial clause will level the playing field for students of imam hatip schools wishing to enter departments in universities other than theology. Minister of Education Celik has announced that more fundamental changes to the higher education law will have to await a further constitutional amendment.

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Background of Imam Hatip Schools  
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3. (U) The ostensible purpose of imam hatip schools (IHS), which developed rapidly starting in the 1950's, is to train future imams or IHS teachers. For this reason, IHS are designated as vocational schools. They are attractive to parents who want their children to receive a more formal and extensive religious education than the general morals/history of religion lessons that are compulsory under the rubric of "religion education" in middle and high schools. In 1996, more than 511,000 students were enrolled in IHSes. In a move designed to swing the balance more toward "secular" education in the wake of the military's 1997 post-modern coup against the Islamist government of then-PM Erbakan (who had declared IHSes the Islamist movement's back yard), the succeeding government made education in regular schools compulsory until eighth grade, resulting in a drop to 193,000 IHS students in 1998. At the same time YOK effectively barred university entrance to IHS graduates to departments other than theology by dropping their university entrance

coefficient to 0.3 from the standard 0.8. A lack of university opportunities for IHS graduates caused parents to place their children elsewhere. IHS enrollment dropped by 40,000 students per year from almost 193,000 in 1998 to 92,000 in 2001, and finally to approximately 70,000 today. PM Erdogan's campaign promise to raise the lower coefficient renewed hope that there is a future in Turkish universities for IHS graduates, resulting in a rise of 20,000 in applications to these schools.

14. (U) Under the present system, approximately 35% of secondary students (900,000) study in technical schools and 65% in regular and Anatolian (elite) high schools. After ninth grade, students in regular and Anatolian high schools must choose among three broad categories of specialization: math, verbal, or a combination of the two. University departments are divided into the same broad categories. For example, philosophy is considered a verbal subject, engineering a math subject, and economics a combination of the two. The high school graduation score is multiplied by 0.8 for all students, including technical students, who continue university studies in their field of specialization. However, the score is multiplied by 0.3 for students wishing to enter departments outside of their secondary school specialization.

15. (U) In practice, this means that graduates of IHSes have their scores multiplied by 0.8 if they enter theology departments but have their scores multiplied by 0.3 for all other subjects, effectively barring them from studying anything other than theology in the university. The new law would widen the choices for IHS graduates by placing them in the verbal category. A graduate of an IHS who wanted to become an engineer would face the same penalty of the 0.3 coefficient, but one who wanted to study history at the university would have his university entrance score multiplied by 0.8 just like a graduate of a regular high school in the verbal stream.

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Revenge of February 28?  
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16. (U) The AKP government argues that these changes are necessary not to save IHSes, but to save technical schools in general. In public and private remarks, Minister of Education Celik has argued that 65% of the population should be in technical schools, not the inverse, as is the current case. One high-ranking education official remarked to poloff that the new rules are required to save technical schools. It is true that IHSes cover most of the courses that regular high schools do and make up the difference of added religious content by requiring students to study an extra year. PM Erdogan reminds interlocutors that he himself is a graduate of an IHS.

17. (U) The new draft law is viewed by the "secular" establishment as an attempt by the AKP government to reverse the post-modern coup of February 28, 1997, which led to Erbakan's ouster. In this context, the TGS issued a press release asserting the draft law is a threat to "secularism". In the secularists' view, opening up universities to IHS graduates is thus a move to pack the universities with religious-minded students and eventually fill government positions with religious "fundamentalists". Forcing YOK members to resign will allow the government to replace the current board with a group more sympathetic to AKP's aims, they assert.

18. (U) Secularists go on to argue that there is no need for IHSes, which produce 25,000 graduates annually when Turkey needs only 5,000 new imams a year. Slightly less than one-third of the students are female, and cannot become imams. The draft law was put together hastily, the secularists claim (the YOK debate has been going on for years and the current government began to consider draft laws soon after taking power at the end of 2002), with basically no input from YOK, to be enacted before the June 20 university entrance examinations.

19. (U) The real victims of the university entrance examinations are not graduates of technical schools, whose entrance rate in regular university courses is more than 7%, the secularists, state, but graduates of regular high schools, whose entrance rate is approximately 8%. In fact, the secularists claim, the government's argument that the new law is necessary does not hold water since in contrast to IHSes, the student population in other technical schools increases every year.

10. (U) The present draft law continues the acrimonious climate and mutual distrust between the AKP government and Turkey,s academia. The government has already taken control over scholarships from universities and frozen hiring of research assistants. It was forced to retract a proposal to dismiss all rectors and senior administrators under public pressure. From the other side, YOK,s uncompromising stance has exasperated even the Inter University Council, which negotiated directly with the government, essentially leaving YOK with no say in its future. On the other hand, most of the teachers in IHSes are graduates of departments of education and provide the same education as in regular schools. Since students in IHSes perform poorly in university examinations in any event, there is little likelihood of a flood of IHS graduates into the universities.

11. (C) Comment: There is wide agreement on the need to reform Turkey,s overly centralized higher education system, though not on the details of how to do it. Unfortunately, fundamental issues have been overshadowed by the debate over coefficients. The head of the Parliament,s Education Committee admitted to the press that the new bill is prepared in reaction to pressure from the IHS base, despite claims by the Minister of Education to the contrary. Unlike its stance regarding entry into the EU or Cyprus, AK Party, in this case, appears to be appealing to its base. Instead of increasing budgetary, administrative and academic equality, the bill largely leaves important decisions in the hands of the government. All parties concerned -- YOK, the Inter University Council, and the Ministry of Education -- have been unable to compromise and produce a bill which addresses the real problems of the education system. Minister Celik has stated that fundamental reforms will have to wait for constitutional changes. Meanwhile, the current poisoned atmosphere bodes ill for real educational reform.

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